

You can see it for kilometers: an immense Corinthian column, towering up nearly 30 meters toward the sky, its massive pedestal set on a high rocky outcrop some twenty-minutes' drive to the west of Wexford, in the southeast corner of Ireland. The country possesses many grand ornamental landscape structures, dating usually from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But this can surely claim to be one of the most spectacular, having been inspired by the celebrated "Pompey's Pillar" in Alexandria (which in fact has nothing to do with the Roman general whose name it bears, but was erected in A.D. 296 to celebrate a victory by the Emperor Diocletian). The Wexford version, a good three meters taller than its Roman original, is now—since the tragic disappearance some years ago of the magnificent Nelson Column in Dublin—the only remaining commemorative monument of its kind in Ireland. It was built in 1839, to a design by the English architect Thomas Cobden, by General Robert Browne-Clayton.

Robert Browne—who adopted his second surname in 1829 when he married Miss Henrietta Clayton—was a member of a wealthy Anglo-Irish family whose principal seat was at Browne's Hill, near Carlow. Early in his military career, while stationed with his regiment, the 12th Light Dragoons, near Rome, he was received in audience by Pope Pius VI, who ceremoniously crowned him with a Dragoon helmet and a prayer that truth and religion might prevail over injustice and infidelity—a poignant if somewhat improbable event which was later immortalized by James Northcote R.A. in a picture which now hangs in London's Cavalry Club. Later, as a lieutenant-colonel, he fought with distinction against Napoleon in the Egyptian campaign of 1801. During that campaign he is reported to have taken more than 600 French prisoners, together with 300 horses, Bonaparte's

# Column Right

**AFTER A DEVASTATING LIGHTNING STRIKE, IRELAND'S  
BROWNE-CLAYTON MONUMENT ONCE AGAIN  
DOMINATES THE LANDSCAPE**

by JOHN JULIUS NORWICH

entire Dromedary Corps and 500 camels. Unquestionably, he had something to commemorate with his column, but, as he was at pains to emphasize, he also intended it to be a memorial to his commanding officer, General Sir Ralph Abercromby, who was killed in action during the campaign.

Browne-Clayton—who died a full general in 1845—carefully specified in his will that every year on March 21, the day that Napoleon's army was driven from Alexandria, the French flag was to be raised on the column at sunrise and lowered at 10:00 A.M., when it was to be substituted by the British flag. This would then fly until sunset “as a memorial to the defeat of the French, which event formed the prelude of Britannia's triumph through a regular and unbroken series of glory and prosperity down to the battle of Waterloo in 1815.” A week later on March 28, the anniversary of Abercromby's death at Aboukir Bay—the reports of which, incidentally, are said to have inspired Beethoven when he was writing the *Eroica* symphony—the flag was to be raised at half-mast throughout the day. Just how long this annual ritual was observed is uncertain, since the column long ago passed out of Browne-Clayton's ownership. But it remained a well-known monument and popular picnic spot, all the more fascinating thanks to an internal spiral staircase, which enabled slimmer visitors to poke their heads above the massive capital and enjoy a stunning view across several counties. (Pompey's Pillar, by contrast—from which the view is much inferior—had no staircase, though the intrepid could climb to the top by rope ladder if so inclined.) Thanks to its superb construction, the column required remarkably little maintenance.

Then, on December 29, 1995, the great column was struck by lightning. It was not the first time—an earlier strike in the nineteenth century had been powerful enough to wrench the iron entrance door off its hinges—but this second impact was a good deal more serious. Several huge stones were dislodged from the capital and the upper one-third of the shaft, and two large sections of masonry on each side were pushed apart, leaving a jagged opening about five meters high and—astonishingly—a meter wide. The internal stairway was also badly

BUILT IN 1839, IRELAND'S BROWNE-CLAYTON MONUMENT WAS MODELED ON THE THIRD-CENTURY A.D. POMPEY'S PILLAR IN ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT. A DESTABILIZING GASH IN THE COLUMN'S CAPITAL WAS CAUSED BY A LIGHTNING STRIKE IN DECEMBER 1995.





COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A SPIRAL STAIRCASE WITHIN THE COLUMN LEADS TO THE TOP OF THE MONUMENT WHERE VISITORS CAN ONCE AGAIN ENJOY A SPLENDID VIEW OF THE SURROUNDING COUNTRYSIDE. A DRAWING DETAILS DAMAGED AND DISPLACED MASONRY. SUPPORT SCAFFOLDING ERECTED, THE COLUMN IS DISASSEMBLED FOR REPAIR.

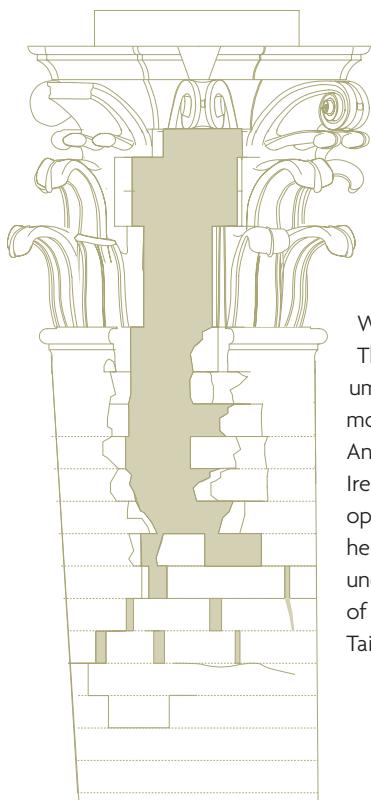
Foundation's European Preservation Program gave us a splendid start; further contributions from the Irish government totalled some \$300,000, which after being matched at 1:2 by the Wilson Challenge produced a further \$150,000; private contributions—matched at 1:1—did the rest; and we were thus able, without too much difficulty, to meet the total budget of \$586,898. From the start, we entrusted the work to James Howley of Howley Harrington Architects. As subsequent experience has shown, we could not have put the monument in more capable hands. He was enthusiastic; he was dedicated, he was a joy to work with, and he was to do a superb job. The scaffolding—essential if there was to be a full analysis of the damage—went up in June 2002, when one of the first tasks was to fix a temporary lightning conductor. With Sir David Davies and Max Ulfane, board members of WMF

damaged and blocked by falling rock and debris. From that moment on, the local authorities found themselves responsible for a desperately dangerous structure. Several large stones at the base were found to be poorly supported, while at the top the wind could be fearsome, even on a relatively calm day. What was to be done?

The first voluntary organization to come to the rescue was the Irish Georgian Society, which commissioned a structural survey by a firm of consulting engineers. They recommended the construction of a lightweight steel tower against the column, both to provide a working platform and to stabilize the whole structure. Its top third would then be dismantled. In addition, all iron ties would be replaced by stainless steel, and the same material would be used for a new staircase in place of the original stone one. The final cost was, alas, well beyond the means of the Wexford County Council.

It was at this point that the World Monuments Fund in Britain was approached by the three major conservation organizations in the Republic of Ireland: the Irish Heritage Council, the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and Islands, and An Taisce (the Irish National Trust). Would we, they asked, become involved and help to raise the funds required for the column's complete restoration? We went to the site, had a look at the damage and immediately agreed. There was no doubt about the architectural importance of the column, and quite obviously the need was urgent—it seemed that at any moment a whole section of the structure might come crashing to earth. An additional consideration was that we had not until then worked in Ireland—something that we were anxious to do; here was a perfect opportunity to make contact with those in charge of the country's heritage. As a result, in 2001–2002 an Irish nonprofit charity was formed under the name of the Wexford Monument Trust, its board composed of members of WMF in Britain, the Wexford County Council, and An Taisce, to collect donations and to carry out the actual work.

A generous grant of U.S. \$25,000 from the Samuel H. Kress





in Britain, I climbed to the top the following October. It was a ravishingly beautiful autumn day and the view, as I had expected, was breathtaking. But what most impressed me was the sheer size of that capital, its colossal volutes and outward-curving acanthus leaves seemingly almost as large as I was, yet each one quite exquisitely carved, with a degree of detail that could never be properly appreciated from below.

By this time it had been agreed that the only safe way to repair the capital was to lower the whole thing to the ground; but this, it need hardly be pointed out, was easier said than done. The outcrop of rock upon which the column was built made it impossible to bring up a normal-sized crane close enough. An outsized one had to be specially imported, and even then the difficulties were formidable: of the nine separate sections of the capital, most weighed well over a ton. The entire capital came in at more than 32 tons. Furthermore, many of its projecting sections were dangerously fragile.

Given the height of the column and the strength of the winds, there could of course be no question of continuing the repairs through the winter, so the work was divided over two separate summers. The first, that of 2002, was devoted to setting up the site—which involved the construction of a temporary access road for the crane and other equipment—and then bricking up that terrifying breach where the lightning had torn the stone apart, and taking down the capital. The second, in 2003, saw the carving and cutting of replacement stones, the straightening and rebuilding of the

damaged part of the column itself, then finally the replacing of the capital. Everything went perfectly according to plan and on Wednesday, December 3 of that second year in the topping-out ceremony, the last stone was set in place at the highest point, together with an ear of corn. According to an old Norse tradition, this was a virtual guarantee that the column would never again be struck by lightning. If only, one felt, it had been done earlier.

The last bar of the scaffolding came down in February 2004 and the Browne-Clayton Monument now stands once again in its former glory, back in the hands of the County Council

who will look after it and ensure regular access to the public. I have not yet seen it in its finished state. That pleasure is to be delayed until our annual visit to the Wexford Opera Festival next October, when we hope to hold another ceremony, this time to formally celebrate the completion in the company of our most important contributors, public and private. Our Deputy Director, Kevin Rogers, has just returned from Ireland and tells me that the work has been quite superbly done. He climbed to the top by the restored staircase and was hugely impressed by the quality of the workmanship throughout. As things turned out, only two pieces of stonework of any size needed to be replaced. At present, he reports, the replacements can be easily identified by their color, but after two or three years they will have weathered

down sufficiently to be indistinguishable from the ground and there will be no visible sign that the column ever sustained any damage at all.

It looks, therefore, as if WMF can once more congratulate itself, and chalk up another major success. We must also salute the architects, structural engineers, surveyors, and the steeplejacks who gave their knowledge and their various skills—and several of whom on occasion risked their lives—to breathe new life into a strange and wonderful monument. I can only hope that the Generals Browne-Clayton and Abercromby, looking down upon their column once again after 165 years, are as happy and as proud as we are. ■

COURSES OF STONE ARE REMOVED  
FROM THE UPPERMOST PORTION  
OF THE COLUMN, LEFT. THE NEWLY  
RESTORED MONUMENT FROM  
WITHIN, BELOW LEFT, AND FROM  
AFAR, BELOW.

